The Enigma of Jesus in the Gospel of John

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The gospel of John is one of my favourite Bible books. I love its imagery and tone. It feels like a text steeped in warmth and love. It uses simple and concrete language, yet this simplicity is rich in profound meaning.

At the same time, however, I find it a most frustrating text, wrapped in mystery, riddle and irony. Pivotal to this sense of frustration is the character of Jesus himself, who stands as the central enigma: time and again, John the Evangelist portrays him as puzzling to his audience, uttering statements that confound his listeners. With the benefit of decades of hindsight, the author adds some explanatory comments—but not always.

With my background in literature—the literature of the Bible, in particular—it fascinates me that a character could be portrayed with such irony. He offers himself as the answer to the great questions of life, yet he presents himself as so mysterious that many people—even his closest followers—fail to understand him. Typically when Jesus speaks within the narrative, his words increase the mystery rather than give clarity. How am I to understand this conundrum of The Answer providing yet more mystery?

As a student of literature, I know irony is an important literary device used by an author to make a vital point. So I must assume the irony is deliberate, designed to push me beyond the obvious level of meaning to what the Evangelist wants me to understand that Jesus is really saying and meaning. In his introduction to a discussion of irony, Alan Culpepper suggests that there is a "silent" communication at work between author and reader and that this "assumes its most intriguing form in the ironies of the gospel." He suggests that the author "smiles, winks and raises his eyebrows as the story is told. The reader who sees as well as hears understands that the narrator means more than he says." It also means that the characters may not always understand what is happening or even what they are saying.[1] Other scholars have noted John's extensive use of ambiguous words, misunderstandings, riddles and irony as key elements in presenting his message.[2] With this idea in the back of my mind then, I began to apply literary analysis skills to explore the ironies in the enigmatic portrayal of Jesus in the gospel of John.

The temple

The presence of this ironic enigma first struck me when reading the story of the cleansing of the temple, one of the early narratives of the gospel of John. After Jesus drives the merchants out of the temple courts, his disciples remember the prophecy, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:17). The quotation from Psalm 69:9 is not one an ordinary reader would anticipate as a messianic prophecy. But like so many of the prophetic fulfilments in the other gospels, only hindsight makes it possible to discern prophetic revelation. When challenged by the religious leaders over what authority he had to take such actions, Jesus enigmatically proclaims, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19). The leaders do not understand—and take the statement literally.

Jesus must know that his claim is ambiguous; in fact, it is deliberately so. But why should he make such a statement? It opens him to ridicule, disbelief and even a potentially case-clinching accusation at his trial (as reported in Matthew 26:61 and Mark 14:58). Only hindsight can make sense of the statement, and the Evangelist explains at this point: "But he was speaking of the temple of his body" (2:21). He then adds,

"After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken" (2:22).

Here is the clue that helped me make sense of Jesus' riddle—one of the most overt cases in the gospel of John of this kind of ironic enigma. The Evangelist portrays Jesus as having no intention that his audience will understand his words at the time he utters them. Jesus spoke prophetically, revealing his true nature. The revelation's meaning, however, was hidden in a riddle that could only be understood after the occurrence of the events to which it referred. In other words, the purpose of the prophecy was not to forewarn the disciples so that they would be prepared for coming events. Rather, it was to confirm their trust in him after the event.

Jesus' foreknowledge

One also finds a cluster of occurrences in the Farewell Speech (13:1–17:26). At the final Passover, for example, Jesus makes a series of related statements with a similar theme. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus again speaks in riddles: "'And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean'" (13:10, 11). The author intrudes again to explain in hindsight what was at the time another enigmatic statement.

Soon after, speaking of his betrayer again, Jesus says, "But it is to fulfil the scripture, the one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me. I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he" (13:18, 19). Here, Jesus plainly announces the purpose of his prophetic riddle: a prophecy being fulfilled before their eyes was not something the disciples were expected to recognise as it happened, so this prophecy was not intended to forewarn. Instead, its function was to confirm *post-factum* the foreknowledge of Jesus as evidence of his divine character.

Twice more the same idea is repeated in this extended farewell speech of Jesus. In 16:4, Jesus says, "But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them." Then in 16:33, Jesus says, "I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace." His outlining of the future is designed to bring

the assurance, not that the disciples would have every detail of the future worked out, but that they could trust that Jesus knew and had everything under control. It was not in the prophecy that they were to have peace, but rather in Jesus.

Johannine irony

We have noticed four statements spread across an entire Gospel at its beginning and its end. But is this making a mountain out of a molehill? Not at all. Although in less overt form, similar themes are consistently present throughout the gospel. Some scholars refer to the characteristic as "Johannine irony." Repeatedly, the gospel's author records riddles and enigmatic statements associated with Jesus that baffle his audiences, despite Jesus' insistence on making clear his own identity and his relationship to the Father. And where people believe, it is usually after they had seen a "sign"—as miracles are usually termed in the gospel. A quick glance shows the density of such events. There is quite a list I can mention.[3]

The gospel of John begins with metaphors evoking mystery and incomprehension: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:5). John the Baptist testifies at Jesus' baptism that he did not know who Jesus was until after he saw the Holy Spirit descend on him (1:33, 34).

To Nathaniel, Jesus says, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these" (1:50). He then prophesies, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (1:51), a statement that almost certainly meant little to his listeners until later.

At the Cana wedding, the master is in ignorance of the origin of the fine wine, though the servants who witnessed the miracle know (2:9): "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (2:11).

In 2:23, 24, "many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people." Similarly, Jesus berates Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what

we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?" (3:11, 12). By contrast, the Samaritans believed because they heard for themselves (4:42). Soon after, Jesus laments that the Jewish people will not believe without visible signs and wonders (4:48).

Over the next two chapters (5:20, 28; 6:14, 26, 30), the relationship between miraculous signs, belief and disbelief is reinforced. Many believe because of the signs; others—particularly the leaders—refuse to believe. Many also leave Jesus because they are baffled by Jesus' hard sayings (6:52, 60, 66). Again, Jesus must have been fully aware of how offensive the imagery of eating his flesh and drinking his blood was—to almost anyone, let alone a Jewish audience with its Mosaic proscription of tasting blood and human flesh. Yet, despite the opportunity to soften or clarify his statements, the author presents Jesus as leaving his listeners in chaos. Only after the resurrection do his words make sense.

John 7 and 8 cover a series of public conversations in which Jesus manages to mystify everyone, offend many and win over others. He leaves his audiences confused as to who he is, despite his repeated assertions as to his identity. Again, these are passages that make more sense after the resurrection, but are baffling at the time (for example, 7:1–10, 33–36; 8:27, 28).

Jesus' healing of the blind man in chapter 9 leads to yet more misunderstandings. The disciples misunderstand the reason for the man's blindness; the Jews misunderstand Jesus. Jesus asserts that the purpose of the blindness is to reveal the glory of God—the very purpose of prophecy and revelation. But in characteristically ironic style, only the blind man sees.

Then Jesus uses the figure of speech of the Good Shepherd that contains the prediction of his death and resurrection—but his audience fails to understand. In 10:24, 25, the Jews ask, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answers, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me." He adds that only his sheep can understand his voice, suggesting that the audience who can understand divine revelation is frequently limited. Finally, he appeals to them to

believe on the basis of accomplished fact: "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:37, 38).

Jesus at first speaks in riddles concerning Lazarus' death, leading the disciples to think Lazarus is recovering (11:11–13). The author explains what Jesus means before having Jesus plainly state that Lazarus is dead. He adds, "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe" (11:14, 15). In his tomb-side prayer, Jesus prays out loud: "I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me" (11:42). The resurrection of Lazarus leads many to believe in him (11:45). Again, mystery and riddle only make sense after the event, leading to faith in Christ.

John the Evangelist explains the full significance of the unintentional prophecy of Caiaphas that it is better that one man dies for the people, but again this is only in hindsight that John is able to elucidate by writing long after the event (11:49–52). Similarly, the disciples don't understand the triumphal entry until after Jesus' glorification, when the significance of Zechariah 9:9 dawns on them (12:16). When a voice speaks from heaven confirming the glorification of Jesus, the crowd fails to understand, yet Jesus explains that it was for their benefit, then adds a prophecy of his death (12:28–33). None of these fully make sense until after the resurrection. Even the unbelief of the Jews is a fulfilment of prophecy (12:37–40) but one that takes hindsight to identify.

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Jesus' final ironies

At the Passover supper, the disciples fail to understand Jesus' repeated pointers to the betrayal by Judas, their own desertion of him and Peter's triple denial (13:28), all of which again are plain after the event. While the disciples continue to fail to understand Jesus' final revelations, he promises them the Counsellor, and leaves them his peace—a peace that does not come from understanding his prophetic statements. No, it is

a peace that comes from the presence of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit (14:5, 8, 25–27). The Holy Spirit will remind them of Jesus' words at the appropriate moment. The rest of Jesus' speech and prayer (chapters 15–17) again indicate his foreknowledge, and that the safety and prosperity of his followers lies in his love and the Father's love, made present through the Spirit.

In his final discourse at the Passover, Jesus speaks at length to prepare the disciples for his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, but does so largely in metaphoric language. Some disciples respond with, "What does he mean by this 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about" (16:18). Jesus adds a couple more metaphors before finally saying, "I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father" (16:25). Relieved, his disciples exclaim, "Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God" (16:29, 30). Ironically, Jesus' exposition of the immediate future leaves his closest followers confused. Even when they claim to understand, their response to the events of the crucifixion and resurrection reveals that in fact they have not understood.

The trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are related in passages studded with prophetic fulfilment. Faith stems from people witnessing the fulfilment, although full understanding does not always follow (19:35–37). Peter and John see the empty tomb and believe, but still don't understand (20:3–9). Thomas refuses to believe until he literally sees (20:24–29). John concludes this chapter with, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:30, 31).

We can see that the gospel of John is rich in mysterious and enigmatic revelations of Jesus through "signs"—his words and actions—most of which only make sense after the event. Consistently, the purpose of these revelations is stated to be that of building faith in Jesus, the centrepiece of the revelation of God, rather than in letting

us know the future. This gospel is not the only one to make such a point. The other gospels also note from time to time the mystery of Jesus and observe that the final understanding of revelation occurs after the crucifixion (for example, Matthew 16:1–12; Mark 9:31, 32; Luke 2:49,50; 9:43–45).

Revelation ironies

After noting these many examples of irony in this gospel, it struck me that there are strong similarities between the gospel and biblical apocalyptic texts.[4] Irony is a key device in the gospel of John, and also in scripture's last book, the Apocalypse, one of the Bible's most difficult books. Yet, ironically, it is called "Revelation." Both John and apocalyptic texts such as Daniel and Revelation have expert explanations—or glosses: explanatory notes written in the margin of a text or sometimes even in the text itself—often from heavenly beings (Jesus or angels), but ironically these don't necessarily lead to enlightenment at the time, as we have seen in the gospel of John.

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Daniel notes that despite Gabriel's elucidation, the vision of Daniel 8 left him "overcome" and "sick." He is "dismayed by the vision" and "did not understand it" (Daniel 8:27). Gabriel's further efforts to give Daniel understanding of the vision (9:23–27 and 10:12–12:4) are equally opaque, full of more highly detailed elaborations in figurative language that simultaneously offer some clarity and further mysteries.

Some of the glosses on the text of Revelation, often but not exclusively given by a heavenly being, are of a similar order (for example, Revelation 7:13–17; 13:18; 17:7–18). To pile irony on irony, the term "gloss" itself can not only mean an explanation of a difficult word or text, but also a misleading or deceptive interpretation. Given the difficulty in understanding apocalyptic texts, one must include the possibility that even these supposed explanations are deliberately obscure—at least to most readers or to most ages—despite any claims to being a "revelation."

God knows

For me, therefore, the gospel of John points the way to recognising that perhaps all prophetic texts present themselves not so much as a foretelling of future events, but as a revelation primarily about Jesus—as the opening line of Revelation confirms: "The revelation of [that is, both from and about] Jesus Christ." It suggests that a key purpose of prophetic revelation is not to forewarn God's people, but to assure them that God knows. For me, instead of building confidence through my ability to construct elaborate time-charts about end-times, prophecy asks that we lose self-trust and place it in the One who knows. It also suggests that prophecies that I still do not understand may not yet have been fulfilled.

Hindsight allows Jesus' followers to know that he understands the future and has it under control. Therefore, we can trust him for what is yet to come. This does not exclude other approaches to prophecy, including its potential to alert us to the future. The Jewish leaders in Herod's day understood prophecy sufficiently to know that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (see Matthew 2:4–6). However, a considerable amount of prophecy still remained obscure. Matthew added a little note of alert to his readers in Jesus' apocalyptic discourse (Matthew 24:15), which told them that the meaning of Jesus' statement could only fully make sense later, since it was addressed to later readers rather than to Jesus' immediate audience.

So my attempt to understand the enigma of Jesus in the gospel of John, expressed through riddles and irony, has led me to discover a bigger picture: that all revelation—the entire Bible, in effect—is designed to point to God, rather than to mere information, time sequences of events or anything else so petty. Its deliberate imprecisions are intended to save us from the presumptions of self-assurance, shifting the focus from our supposed wisdom to the omniscience of God. In the words of Jesus, it is given to us to bring us peace and freedom from fear. Its purpose is that as prophetic words are fulfilled, we may say, "Now we are sure that Jesus is the one, for he warned us of this. He knows the future and so we have his peace."

1. R Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983, pages 165–6.

2. Such as Warren Carter, *John: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 2006, and Gail O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative mode and theological claim*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1986.

3. Paul D Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985, has written an entire book on the ironies found in John's gospel.

4. This idea is not original: scholars such as John Ashton (*Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), John Painter (*The Quest for the Messiah: the history, literature and theology of the Johannine community* (2nd edition), Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) and J L Martyn (*History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2nd edition), Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), have elaborated the connection between John and apocalyptic texts.